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ABSTRACT

This is a summary in outline form of the English literature teaching situation in Sri Lanka. Pupils may begin literature in English in grade 10 when they are about 15. All undergraduates study some English to gain English reading ability. Most of them value the ability to speak and write English, though present facilities make it difficult to impart these skills to them. General degree students achieve a fair command of English and a broad knowledge of the main periods and trends of English literature. Special courses are offered which lead to Honors in English. Honors students go through a fairly exacting course and achieve a fairly thorough understanding of English literature. Both mother-tongue literatures, Sinhala and Tamil, are taught in schools. Many translations of French, German, and Russian works are available. (Author/CFM)

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ENGLISH TEACHING INFORMATION CENTRE

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING PROFILE: SRI LANKA

August 1976

LITERATURE ANNEX

1. Status of literature

The Ceylonese view of English literature is as magnificently varied as English literature itself. This variety is due to historical circumstances through which English literature came to be revered by some while remaining unknown to others. The present trend is for all parties to unite on "Literature in English". This includes original writing in English anywhere in the world, and English translations of literature from anywhere in the world. Thus is God's plenty reaped, and political bickering avoided.

2. Literary Education

2.1 In the school

A new system of education has recently been introduced which will be applicable to children entering Grade 10 (first year of the Senior Secondary School) in 1976 and thereafter. Under the previous system students could opt for English literature as a specific subject at 'O' level at Grade 8 at approximately age 13. Texts included EMMA, MACBETH and selections from English poetry of all periods. Similarly students could opt for English at 'A' level, taking two papers:

Paper I Texts currently

i. either OTHELLO or Ibsen: AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE;

ii. Leonard Woolf: THE VILLAGE IN THE JUNGLE:

iii. either Hardy: THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE, or
E M Forster: PASSAGE TO INDIA;

iv. selected poems: Elizabethan, Romantic, Modern English, and Commonwealth;

v. selected modern short stories.

Paper II Essay, Precis, Appreciation, Correction of Errors

The 'O' and 'A' level system had been in existence (under different names) ever since the changeover to the locally-structured GCE examinations from Cambridge to London GCE examinations in 1966 which has resulted in a kind of continuity. Changes were gradually made to suit local conditions, eg whereas 15 years ago the 'A' level paper II consisted largely of practical criticism, the more recent paper only contained one exercise on comprehension and appreciation, and an 'unseen' passage or poem.

The new educational system sees a complete change with the introduction of the Higher National Certificate of Education (HNCE), the examination for which will be held, for the first time, for those completing Grade 11 in 1977. Now, pupils may begin literature in English as an independent study at Grade 10 when they are about 15. Only a small number of students a year follow this course of study and use as a textbook the:

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2.1.1 Government-sponsored "Reading with Understanding: An Anthology of Literature in English". This is the only textbook which will be used. A few who teach this course will

2.1.2 be members of local English Teachers' Guilds (professional bodies organised by the teachers themselves but given Government assistance by the English Unit where the ACE is ODM funded) or the Sri Lanka English Association, an independent voluntary organisation which is vigorous and keen on close Council involvement. The Council shows them films (eg MACBETH) and they collaborate with the Council (assisting with the Judging of our 25th Anniversary English Short Story Competition in 1975). Some of the members of this Association will be language teachers in leading schools whose best pupils (however few) leave school with an extremely good command of English. Other members will be English Instructors at the six University Campuses.

2.1.3 There is an All-Ceylon Union of Government English Teachers, but this is concerned mainly with conditions of service.

2.2 University

2.2.1 All undergraduates study some English to gain English reading ability.

2.2.2 Most undergraduates greatly desire a general command of English. They value the ability to speak and write English, though present facilities make it difficult to impart these skills to them.

2.2.3 Specialisation in the University

Approximately 30 undergraduates take English as a University subject each year. This is available at all campuses but the Vidyalankara Campus is designated as the centre for development. Of these students about half, approximately 15 each year, read English for the General Degree of BA along with two other subjects.

Approximately 4 students each year gain admission to 'special' courses leading to Honours in English. Such students take a 4-year course in English, with concentration on English during the last 3 years. The 9 papers are as follows:

Shakespeare: 6 texts, background, including mediaeval and other drama (eg Marlowe, Jonson);

Practical criticism:

English Poetry from Chaucer to Keats:

The English Novel from Defoe to George Eliot:
(includes Hawthorne, Melville);

The English Language:

Modern Literature I } These papers include some important writers
Modern Literature II } like Eliot, Yeats, D H Lawrence, Brecht but also develop themes, eg Poetry in the theatre, Fiction and the Developing Countries, Realism and the Novel, Symbolism, etc.

A Dissertation of approximately 10,000 words on a topic selected in consultation with the Head/Department. (Students have tended to concentrate on Commonwealth Literature and studies of English in Sri Lanka);

One paper in another subject in the Faculty of Arts.

2.2.4 Standards in the University

General degree students achieve a fair command of English and a broad knowledge of the main periods and tendencies of English Literature. Close examination of the specified texts (about 8 plays, 9 novels and 8 poets) is encouraged.

'Special' or 'Honours' students go through a fairly exacting course and achieve a fairly thorough understanding of English Literature. An attempt is made to treat English as a humanistic discipline and not as the study of texts, authors and periods alone.

Students who achieve at least Second Class standard in either course would be capable of undertaking postgraduate study in England without further training. However a General Second would need to have good grades in English: it is possible to achieve a Second on marks in the other two subjects.

2.2.5 Postgraduate

Facilities are very limited.

It is not possible to cover the specialised library needs of postgraduate students, though some fields are covered to about the level required for a Master's Degree.

Hardly any grants for research in Humanities are available compared with the position in the Sciences where many foreign agencies help.

There is much material for the study of language use in Sri Lanka and of the teaching of English.

3. The Literary Scene

3.1 Both mother-tongue literatures, Sinhala and Tamil, are taught in schools. It is interesting that a Sinhala translation of HAMLET figures in the senior secondary Sinhala syllabus.

There are Sri Lankans writing in English. Best achievements are in recent poetry (the last 15-20 years) and the short story. Some English language productions of plays have reached a high standard.

3.2 Many translations are attempted. There is a great range but few have reached real distinction and nothing that could be called definitive.

English in Sri Lanka functions as a window on the literature of the world - thus there are many 'translations' of French, German and Russian works from English translations. This trend has been very valuable in drama where it has helped to promote an extremely lively and challenging theatre in the vernacular.

A few British texts have been published locally for schools, eg EMMA and MACBETH.

There is a fair amount of local publishing of English writing by Sri Lankans.

3.3 Availability of texts is still quite reasonable. However it is very important to anticipate the effects of Sri Lanka's adverse foreign exchange position. Even Penguin Books are beyond the buying power of an average teacher or student. The average income of 80% of Sri Lankans is less than £8 a month at present exchange rates.